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Aoko, Gaudencia

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Aoko, Gaudencia (b. 1943), a Luo woman, helped to found and lead two African initiated churches (AICs). The third of four children, Aoko was born in July 1943 in the town of Awasi, nineteen miles east of Kisumu in Nyanza Province, Kenya. Her educational background is uncertain. In interviews she called herself “uneducated” and claimed to know neither Kiswahili nor English, suggesting that she did not attend school beyond the primary level. Young Aoko was winsome by all accounts – “photogenic,” “tall with a smooth blackness,” and a “beautiful well-proportioned face” (Dirven, 1970: 126).

Against Aoko’s wishes not to marry, in 1957 her conservative father arranged a marriage to Simeo Owiti, a Catholic friend from Njoro near Nakuru. Three years later, the couple relocated south of the Kenya border to Bugire in the North Mara district of Tanganyika. Here Aoko attended Tatwe, a Catholic mission run by the Maryknoll Fathers, where she learned the Catechism and was baptized.

Early in 1963, her two children, aged one and four, died mysteriously on the same day. Soon after, she divorced her husband. At this time, Aoko began to have visions of Jesus and Mary, who instructed her to start a new religion called “Maria Legio.” Giving her the Christian name Gaudencia, they commissioned her to baptize, exorcise, and heal the sick. In April 1963, at the suggestion of her husband’s brother, Johannes Muga, Aoko made the ten-mile trip to see Simeo Ondeto, a religious leader living in Suna, Kenya.

She found Ondeto and his mother, “Mama Maria,” at the homestead of Johanes Baru in South Nyanza. Ondeto surprised Aoko by greeting her by name, despite never having met previously. Ondeto and his mother identified themselves as the figures in her visions. “We are the persons

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you were seeing up there [in heaven]. We have descended here in a black man's image to visit you Africans, descendants of Esau" (Hinga, 1990: 94). They laid hands on the girl, blessing her as Jesus and Mary had done in her visions. They instructed her to baptize a crowd of people gathered outside the homestead. Thereafter Aoko spent a month in South Nyanza baptizing, healing, and preaching.

The meeting with Ondeto and his mother marked the beginning of Aoko's ministry in the group for which she is best known – the Legio Maria Church, founded on the model of the Catholic lay association Legion of Mary. She drew thousands into the movement through her charismatic preaching, and conducted mass baptisms according to the instruction of Ondeto and "Mama Maria." Within a year, Legio claimed nearly 100,000 members. By the 1990s it claimed two million. Reliable statistics are unavailable, but Legio probably numbers over one million today.

The church's success was due in large part to Aoko's charismatic leadership. Ondeto was detained for a time at Homa Bay, the target of government persecution. His mother, who died in 1966, was too old to travel widely. This left the task of proselytizing to Aoko, who drew large crowds throughout western Kenya and in parts of Uganda and Tanzania. Aoko came to be seen as a great moral reformer, especially in her home area of Central Nyanza. She condemned Catholic missionaries for requiring fees to administer the sacraments and said mass and heard confessions personally. She ordained priests, baptized women and men not in communion with the Catholic Church because of polygamous marriages, preached against social ills such as smoking, drunkenness, and land disputes, conducted healings and exorcisms, and burned witchcraft paraphernalia.

Aoko's peregrinations for Legio took her from rural western Kenya to the corridors of power in Nairobi and back again. Contemporary observers called her Legio's "most colourful figure," a "crowd-puller" of a "Luo girl" whose "magnetic style" kept "the listener spellbound" (Dirven, 1970: 126; Barrett 1968: 149). Aoko's importance is reflected in Legio's first constitution (1964), which called her "Rt. Rev. Mama," one of "two extraordinary spiritual leaders" of Legio, and its "Auxiliary Spiritual Leader of the Faith."

In the late 1960s she faced attempts by male rivals to marginalize her. Men close to Ondeto, including Aoko's ex-brother-in-law, developed a church hierarchy of cardinals, archbishops, and bishops that excluded women from major leadership positions. In response, Aoko held a press conference in Nairobi in June 1968. She issued a statement as "leader and founder of the Legio Maria Church" rejecting the new arrangement, insisted that leadership be open to any adult with charismatic gifts, criticized Ondeto for calling himself "Jesus Christ," and leveled charges of embezzlement against him. Legio headquarters in Suna reacted swiftly, barring women from the priesthood and reducing Aoko's title to "Sister General" (Dirven, 1970: 207, 237).

In response, Aoko resolved to establish a more egalitarian church, wherein anyone with spiritual gifts could lead. Her first two attempts to register a church failed. The Kenyan government rejected applications for the Legio Maria Orthodox Catholic Church in 1968 and the Holy Church of Africa, East Africa in 1969. But Aoko's third attempt, in 1971, succeeded. She headquartered the new Communion Church at her natal compound in Awasi. It was small compared to Legio (about 800 followers in the 1980s), but had centers at Mpitano, Rapogi (South Nyanza); Imbo, Asembo (Central Nyanza); and Njiru, Kasarani (Nairobi) (Hinga, 1990: 351).

Aoko's egalitarian ideals and Christian activism bestowed a mixed legacy on this new church. As in Legio, mass in the Communion Church was conducted in Latin, and the church used Roman Catholic clerical titles. Aoko used the same hymns, prayers, rosary, and the twenty-four beaded catena as before. But in contrast to Legio and the Roman Catholic Church, the Communion Church allowed female priests to celebrate Sunday mass. Many were veterans from Legio who had been forced out. Ondeto and his "Mama Maria" were revered, but their pictures were not on the altar. For Aoko, the Communion Church meant equality. All church members wore the same robes embroidered with the communion chalice, and all church members – even children – wore the white biretta reserved for cardinals in Legio.

Little attention has been paid to post-Legio Aoko. Feminist historiography treats her as representative of female African religious founders and leaders whose accomplishments were usurped by men. This is understandable, as Aoko's break with Legio Maria effectively caused her disappearance in the press and scholarly literature. Nevertheless, she remained an influential

religious leader and continued to defy convention. Contrary to Luo custom, Aoko established her own *dala* (homestead) on the basis of successful business ventures. She even took three wives, calling upon the cultural idiom of a “female husband.” Her immediate family members called her *Jaduong*, a title reserved for eminent male householders, and deferred to her authority in spiritual and domestic matters. She thus appropriated a traditionally male role in a society that excluded women and unmarried men from positions of power.

Scholars differ as to the significance of Aoko's career. Some see it as evidence for the opportunities afforded to charismatic women by AICs to transcend patriarchal norms. Others see in her later marginalization evidence for the merely "ephemeral" quality of such opportunities. Either way, it is clear that Aoko was a trailblazer who challenged the sexist and ageist prejudices prevalent in her society and within the Roman Catholic Church.

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